DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 125 CS 509 202

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TITLE Using the Internship as a Tool for Assessment: A Case Study.
PUB DATE Aug 95
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (78th, Washington, DC, August 9-12, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Evaluation Methods; Feedback; Higher Education; *Internship Programs; Program Effectiveness; *Public Relations; Student Experience
IDENTIFIERS Applied Communication

ABSTRACT

With increasing concern for accountability in education, faculty and administrators are seeking improved means to evaluate their programs. The internship provides a natural feedback loop for program assessment as it bridges the gap between the academic and the applied worlds of communication. A case study explored the utility of the analysis of student internship feedback and its subsequent impact on program assessment and development of a public relations program at a mid-sized university in the southeast. Findings suggest three key points about the usefulness of internships in assessment: (1) the internship can be translated into empirical results; (2) a significant confluence can occur among the program administrator, the students of the program, and those individuals who supervise students in the workplace; and (3) the internship experience can reflect on the entire program of study and highlight its strengths and weaknesses. (Contains 10 references and 1 table of data.) (RS)

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Using the Internship as a Tool for Assessment:

A Case Study

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CS509202

Presented to:
The Internships and Placement Interest Group Division
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Washington, D.C., August 1995

RUNNING HEAD: Internship & Assessment

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ABSTRACT

With increasing concern for accountability in education, faculty and administrators currently are seeking improved means by which to evaluate their programs. The internship provides a natural feedback loop for program assessment as it bridges the gap between the academic and the applied worlds of communication. Specifically, this paper, by case study, explores the utility of the analysis of student internship feedback and its subsequent impact on program assessment and development.

One of the most necessary activities in the communication discipline today is also one of the most challenging: how to assess the communication program in a meaningful and timely fashion. Program assessment, as well as institutional accreditation, demands a close relationship between program goals, measurement of the progress toward these goals, analysis of these measurements, and a feedback mechanism for communicating the results back to the goal setters. Certainly, programs in communication are expected to operate in some kind of harmony with the communication activities of organizations outside the university in professional settings.

This paper describes one possible activity in this matrix: the use of student internships as a means of assessing the communication program from which the students will take their degrees. An internship program provides an excellent mechanism to generate feedback for assessment; that is, communicating needed information back to those individuals who are charged with setting goals and making decisions for the program. Of particular interest in this paper is the relationship between the activities of students during their internships and the content of the courses in their major. The internship is a crucial step in bridging the gap between the academic and the applied worlds of communication for students as well as faculty, and provides a significant opportunity to identify what, if any, distance exists

between the academic program and the practical world. The following essay explores assessment, and then presents a case study involving public relations internship letters which were used to generate a checklist for the assessment process.

Literature Review

Forty states have some type of assessment mandates, according to Theodore J. Marchese (1990-91), vice president of the American Association for Higher Education and editor of Change Magazine. Presently the state mandates are relatively permissive: each institution is free to devise an assessment plan that best fits its individual needs, but the fact that the majority of the states have a mandate for assessment relays the significance of such a concept to the educator. At its December 13, 1989, Board of Regents meeting, the University System of Georgia approved the following policy on planning and assessment:

> Each institution shall have a plan, submitted to the Chancellor's office, which will contain the institution's current goals and priorities, a summary of significant assessment results and associated improvement objectives, and action plans by which institutional priorities, including improvements in effectiveness, will be achieved. (Section 200--Organization)

The language used in the policy makes it clear that a formalized

plan addressing goals, priorities, assessment results and improvements in effectiveness must be in place. The concept of assessment has moved from the notion of a "good idea" to a requirement in academe. The number of states mandating assessment and the language used in board policy should motivate educators to be proactive in assessment, especially while the directives remain relatively permissive. This window of opportunity for proactive participation in the assessment process should be a high priority in academe.

Moreover, with budget cuts and program reductions a reality in higher education, assessment may have evolved from a high priority to a lifeline. Many programs threatened with budget cuts or even program elimination claim assessment as the best protection. Often deans, presidents, chancellors, or governing boards do not understand the unique characteristics or goals of programs (Atwater, 1993). Assessment materials provide empirical data that can define and verify not only the nature of programs but show continuing progress toward academic goals.

Assessment has evolved through the interaction of the concepts of academic improvement and external accountability (Ewell, 1992). The undergraduate curriculum reform of the early 1980s was prompted in part by the choice-based curriculum of the 1960s. It became apparent in the 1980s that many students were ill prepared for college and that students graduating from college lacked basic skills necessary for the transition into the work place. Three major themes emerged from the curriculum

reform debate: high standards, active student involvement in the learning process, and explicit feedback on performance (National Institute of Education, 1984). By late 1986, both legislators and governors had become sensitive to the impact of monies being put into postsecondary education. Especially during tight budget years, state governments wanted to see the return on their investment, thus the accountability movement was put into motion.

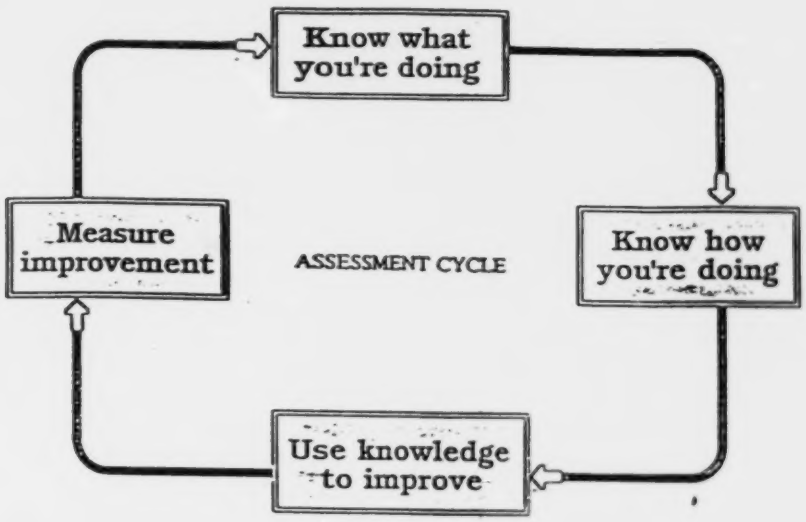
Assessment is defined as:

> The process of determining the degree to which expected results have been achieved in the actual outcomes of institutional activities, and of consequently improving the institution's performance of those activities. Assessment is accomplished through formal, systematic, observation, measurement, statistical analysis, testing or other means. (University System of Georgia Outline for Developing Models for Assessing Outcomes of the Major)

The motivating purpose of assessment should be improvement, an improvement not obtained by comparing institutions but by programs evaluating themselves to determine their effectiveness. Assessment requires that programs question and reflect upon appropriate curriculum, educational experiences, and the amount of student learning. Ultimately, tools (observations, testing, etc.) for measuring results should be developed that provide programs with feedback. The end result of this feedback provides input for improvement of programs. The process of assessment

helps frame the abstract notion of "learning" into measurable results, aiding the educator in answering the questions of "how well are we doing what we should be doing?"

The assessment cycle (Assessing Outcomes in the Major, 1992) is diagrammed as follows:



As a cyclical process with no beginning or end, the model continuously provides feedback to the program.

Feedback is perhaps the paramount benefit of the assessment cycle in that it identifies areas of weakness or strength for the program's improvement. For example, an outcome for a journalism program could be that "students have a working knowledge of the First Amendment before they graduate." If questions pertaining to the First Amendment are not adequately answered by the students on a senior exit exam, faculty members in the journalism program need to look to new curriculum or revised course content aimed at improving the program. Curriculum changes, changes in

course sequencing, new assignments or learning activities are all examples of how assessment can be used for improvement.

Bourland, Graham, and Fulmer (1995) summarized the results of an intern feedback analysis and indicated that it could be used for a variety of purposes such as evaluating potential and existing sites, helping students select courses, as well as for assessing capstone courses. They wrote (p. 13),

> This kind of study might be characterized as outcomes-driven, student-generated, and feedback-sensitive for program assessment. Clearly, this kind of information is useful for faculty, students and administrators in building, maintaining and revising successful public relations programs. Faculty members can use these results to determine overall strengths and weaknesses of their program as well as focus specific attention on the saliency of a particular capstone course.

The methods and procedures used in assessment are varied. Program participants are encouraged to use creativity and their expertise when developing measurement methods for assessment. An exit exam is only one option. Other programs alternately implement senior exit interviews, alumni surveys, internship supervisor surveys, student portfolio reviews, capstone course evaluations, standardized tests, pre-test/post test, etc. While much of program assessment leans toward quantification through surveys and tests, qualitative methods such as the interviews also provide creative and insightful opportunities for

assessment. Greene (1994, p. 54) wrote of qualitative evaluation in social programs, "Qualitative methods, for example, can effectively give voice to the normally silenced and can poignantly illuminate what is typically masked."

Faculty members are considered the most credible sources for formulating assessment measures for their particular programs. Faculty members have the best knowledge of what their students should know, and therefore should be well positioned to formulate assessment methods. When program members join together to tabulate and discuss the measurable results of assessment methods significant information emerges. An advantage of this joint effort is that it helps faculty members objectify themselves from that which they know best; for when faculty develop courses, monitor content, and advise students, it becomes difficult to fairly evaluate how effectively a program is working.

In the case that follows, the faculty of a public relations program decided to incorporate the students' voices in one method of assessment. As such, the program rather than the students were tested, allowing the program a reflection of itself as a mirror of current and future practices. The method represented qualitative and quantitative approaches. Faculty from both the public relations program and the departmentally related speech communication program were involved in the program evaluation.

The Case Study: An Assessment Process

The internship, as a pre-professional experience for students, affords an excellent mechanism for program assessment. Regardless of the particular internship program's discipline, a review of student activities based on student reports, portfolios and discussions with supervisors provides a basis for feedback. For example, discussions with internship site supervisors and interns in the past have led the authors to make course adjustments such as incorporating expanded discussion of "pitching" stories to the media.

Feedback can also be more formal, more empirically driven, with a structured approach for evaluating the internship experience. In this case study, a content analysis of intern feedback in the form of mid-term letters provided a listing of student activities, a listing which was then applied in a formal assessment of the public relations program of a mid-sized university in the southeast. The assessment process is described below beginning with an overview of the content analysis, and followed by the application of the resulting checklist based on established program outcomes or objectives.

The actual checklist originated from an earlier study in which the researchers (Bourland, Graham & Fulmer, 1995) examined 102 mid-term letters, or narrative accounts, from students participating in a senior-level, full-time, required internship program. The mid-term letters described the interns' activities and progress, and represented approximately 200 hours of work per

student, 54 different sites, and a two-year time span. The letters were one of several standard requirements of the internship program (in addition to a mid-term meeting, final report, portfolio and interview), and as such, rendered an unobtrusive panorama of the internship experience. Traditionally the faculty supervisor evaluates the student's progress and determines whether the site is meeting its contractual obligations, based on these mid-term reports. Students also know their letters are posted for review by other students.

The method for analyzing the letters entailed two different authors reviewing each letter to extract tasks and other recurring items. Using an adaptation of Lofland and Lofland's (1984) categories for analyzing social settings, the items derived from the content analysis were defined as acts (specific tasks with tangible products) and encounters (interpersonal development items such as networking and interacting with vendors). Two of the three authors, furthermore, had to agree on the identification of the repetitive acts and encounters culled from the narratives.

The content analysis of these narratives yielded 89 various repetitive activities described by the students, which were then collapsed into 46 categories and ranked. Items achieving a mention by at least 15 of the 102 students resulted in a "top 21" listing of recurring acts and encounters (See Table 1). The 21 items mentioned by students included special event planning and managing; writing for a variety of purposes -- press releases,

memoranda, letters, etc.; use of technology (the fax, desktop publishing programs, etc.) as well as general office work; exposure to the "real world" and self-development; vendor contacts along with networking opportunities and participation in meetings; and collateral development such as writing and designing newsletters, brochures and signage. Other items mentioned were research, reports and media relations.

Items below the 15 percent demarcation tended to be more specific divisions of items already represented (e.g., "features" with 14 mentions was more specific than the press releases or newsletters) or represented specialized areas (e.g., job interviewing, with 7 mentions, or international public relations, with 2 mentions). These items were not collapsed because they did not clearly go into one singular category and because the students' distinctions could not be retained. Items not mentioned as frequently were, however, considered in light of future trends which would affect the program and the field.

The results of this analysis of student feedback served as the basis for assessing the public relations program, according to established program outcome or objective statements. For example, one outcome was: "To offer students a program consistent with current public relations practices." Using the public relations sequence of courses, each item in the content analysis-derived list of public relations activities was compared to each course identified by course descriptions or syllabi as addressing the itemized topic.

Virtually every course in the pre-major area, the major, and upper-division courses (related to the major) were identified as addressing at least one and as many as ten of the top 21 intern activities. Only four activities were not directly reflected in a course within the program of study. Three were general office work; real world references which highlighted the transition between school and work; and self-development or comments relative to an increased sense of professionalism, and improved portfolios as well as organizational and deadline abilities. These three activities, however, are expected results of the internship process itself. The fourth activity not represented in the program of study was special event management (versus planning), although basic planning elements are covered in at least three different required courses. The other finding in this application section was that of all the classes, the public relations writing course received the highest number of corresponding activities from the internship program.

Based on these results, the following recommendations were forwarded. The first recommendation was to begin to address the needs of special event management versus planning by offering an elective course in special events.

The other recommendations centered around the fact that the public relations writing course was so heavily weighted with the activities performed by the interns. To maximize the benefits offered by this course, the assessment team suggested creating a separate "Specialized Publications" course which could address

writing for, editing and designing brochures, newsletters, signage, etc., thereby allowing the existing course to focus more on broader writing applications. Additionally, since the subjects covered in this class were so important for the internship or for entry-level work, students (as well as faculty) would benefit from a lower student-faculty ratio in the public relations writing course. To achieve these recommendations, both an upgraded computer lab for class as well as a faculty or computer staff position would be requisite.

Discussion

While these recommendations and their implementation are still under review, the internship experiences provided an important feedback loop for program assessment. This case study suggests three key points about the usefulness of internships in assessment. First, the internship can be translated into empirical results, greatly assisting those individuals who directly shape the public relations program. This empiricism should also be advantageous when confronting non-program administrators (deans, vice-presidents) with the need for additional human and physical resources.

Second, this case study highlights the significant confluence which occurs between the program administrator (the faculty typically), the students of the program, and those individuals who supervise students in the work place. Such a convergence of feedback heightens the usefulness of the

internship for assessment; that is, this assessment is not unilaterally driven by only one of these groups. In many cases, unfortunately, program assessment rests with program administrators' perceptions of successes and needs.

A final conclusion which might be drawn from this case study concerns the holistic nature of this kind of assessment. The internship experience reflects on the entire program of study and highlights its strengths and weaknesses. Program assessment which is conducted via examination scores in introductory classes, for example, are limited in their revelation. This holistic assessment is reflected in the following model:

Program Objectives

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Internship Experiences

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Interpretation of Program Needs

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Changes in the Program Objectives

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Further Analysis of the Internship Experiences

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Continued Interpretation of Program Status

¦

On-going Changes in Program Objectives.

As this model indicates, this case study suggests the evolutionary nature of program assessment via the internship.

Random samples of letters from interns can be evaluated annually to maintain a list which accurately reflects current practices in the field, or at least current expectations of the interns. Additional benefits of this holistic assessment include using the internship checklist as a basis for evaluating capstone courses, conducting in-depth interviews with students and internship site supervisors, or reviewing student portfolios.

The assessment process reviewed herein focuses strictly on programs; that is, it addresses the state of the program according to current field practice. A natural limitation of this case is that it does not address the student's level of expertise nor faculty effectiveness. Additionally, syllabi and course content may not exactly parallel what occurs in the classroom. Total program assessment would certainly require the application of a variety of assessment measures.

Summary

This paper has suggested, via case study, the usefulness of the internship experience for program assessment in public relations. This essay especially noted the strong link between program objectives and the vital feedback loop provided by student internship activities. Through the methods discussed in this essay, internship experiences can be translated into a checklist of knowledge necessary for the successful transition from the classroom to professional settings. The internship

experiences provide a basis for holistic assessment of a program's strengths and weaknesses and can provide empirically-driven justifications for program changes.

TABLE 1

An Internship Job Description

Rank	Category	# of References
1	Press Releases	56
2	Event Planning	52
3.5	Technology	46
3.5	General Office Work	46
5	"Real World"	42
6	Vendor Contacts	41
7	Newsletters	39
8	Research	37
9	Networking	33
10.5	Self-Development	32
10.5	Miscellaneous Writing	32
12	Meeting Participation	27
13.5	Signage/Display	26
13.5	Office Writing	26
15	Event Set-up	24
16	Media Relations	22
17	Telephone Contacts	19
18	Brochures	18
19	Press/Information Kits	17
20.5	Promotion/Publicity	15
20.5	Reports	15

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